

**STATEMENT OF
CHAIR ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS, AND EMERGENCY
MANAGEMENT**

**“FEMA’s Response to the 2008 Hurricane Season and the National Housing
Strategy”**

SEPTEMBER 23, 2008

We are pleased to welcome all of you today to our hearing, especially our witnesses, on FEMA’s response to the 2008 Hurricane Season and on the National Disaster Housing Strategy. This year’s Hurricane season has been unusually active and once again has had a dramatic impact on America’s Gulf Coast region. The President has declared 13 major disasters or emergencies under the Stafford Act for Hurricanes and Tropical Storms in the 2008 Hurricane season, however, including Tropical Storms Edouard and Fay, and Hurricanes Bertha, Dolly, Gustav and Ike. More than two million people evacuated in the wake of Hurricanes Ike and Gustav. The American people must be assured in the midst of yet another powerful hurricane season that the country is prepared for seasonal and terrorist events alike and that FEMA has developed a coherent housing strategy for addressing the inevitable aftermath of large scale disasters.

We can make no final judgment until all the evidence is in, but the federal, state and local authorities appear to have done a credible job in evacuating citizens away from hurricane danger. At the same time, despite improvements from three years ago, a number of the problems may remain, such as emerging complaints that New Orleans’s poorest residents were transported on busses with no announced destination and warehoused in crowded and substandard conditions. If so, we fear that next time many residents may choose to remain in place as they did during Hurricane Katrina. I spoke with FEMA Administrator David Paulson, as the evacuation was beginning. His assurance concerning complete evacuation materialized, but he also spoke of specific destinations and pre-positioned supplies that complaints from Louisiana now call into question.

To address the issues of accountability that were on stark display during the Katrina response, Congress passed our Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006, which prescribed directives that were necessary to prepare for the next disaster. Among the most important was a mandate to FEMA to submit a report to Congress describing the National Disaster Housing Strategy. In response, FEMA drafted a National Disaster Housing Strategy and requested public comment on July 24, 2008. In anticipation of this hearing, which was previously postponed at FEMA’s request, I appreciate that FEMA extended the comment period on this important policy so that comments from today’s hearing can be included on the public record.

The Post-Katrina Act requires the FEMA Administrator to ensure that a new National Disaster Housing strategy provides a comprehensive approach to housing victims of a disaster for the immediate and long-term as needed, consistent with the

Administrator's role as the principal emergency management advisor to the President. In reviewing and analyzing the National Disaster Housing Strategy, today's hearing will help the subcommittee understand the Strategy's strengths and weaknesses within the context of the Post-Katrina Management Reform Act. The aftermath of Hurricanes Gustav and Ike also should help us gauge the effectiveness of the Post-Katrina Management Reform Act and of FEMA's first significant test under the Act.

We especially appreciate the testimony we will receive from Mayor Ray Nagin of New Orleans about the most recent responses after Gustav and Ike came ashore, the evacuation, and the ability of FEMA, the city and state to provide the needed assistance and progress since Hurricane Katrina. It will be important to hear of improvements that the city of New Orleans, the state of Louisiana and FEMA have made in responding to these hurricanes, but equally important is testimony concerning other important elements of preparation and response, including planning and consultation among the authorities that were involved, as well as the remaining challenges.

As we focus on conditions of citizens after the storm, this Subcommittee also is particularly concerned about the role and responsibilities of the American Red Cross, a congressional chartered organization, which has a major assistance role in recovery from disasters. A recent GAO report found that the Red Cross and other disaster relief charities, such as the Salvation Army and the United Way of America, are unprepared to meet mass casualty needs in the aftermath of a major disaster. We have called both GAO and the Red Cross to testify today, in light of GAO findings that a large scale disaster could overwhelm the Red Cross and other charities that have federal responsibilities for assisting the government in providing assistance to victims of disasters. In the aftermath of the devastation of Katrina we must look at the issues differently and broadly and take measured action. If the Red Cross is expected to play a role in recovery from major disasters, we must work with FEMA to define the functions that the Red Cross and other relief charities realistically can perform to supplement the federal government's role.

We look forward to hearing from today's distinguished witnesses this afternoon and thank them for their testimony.